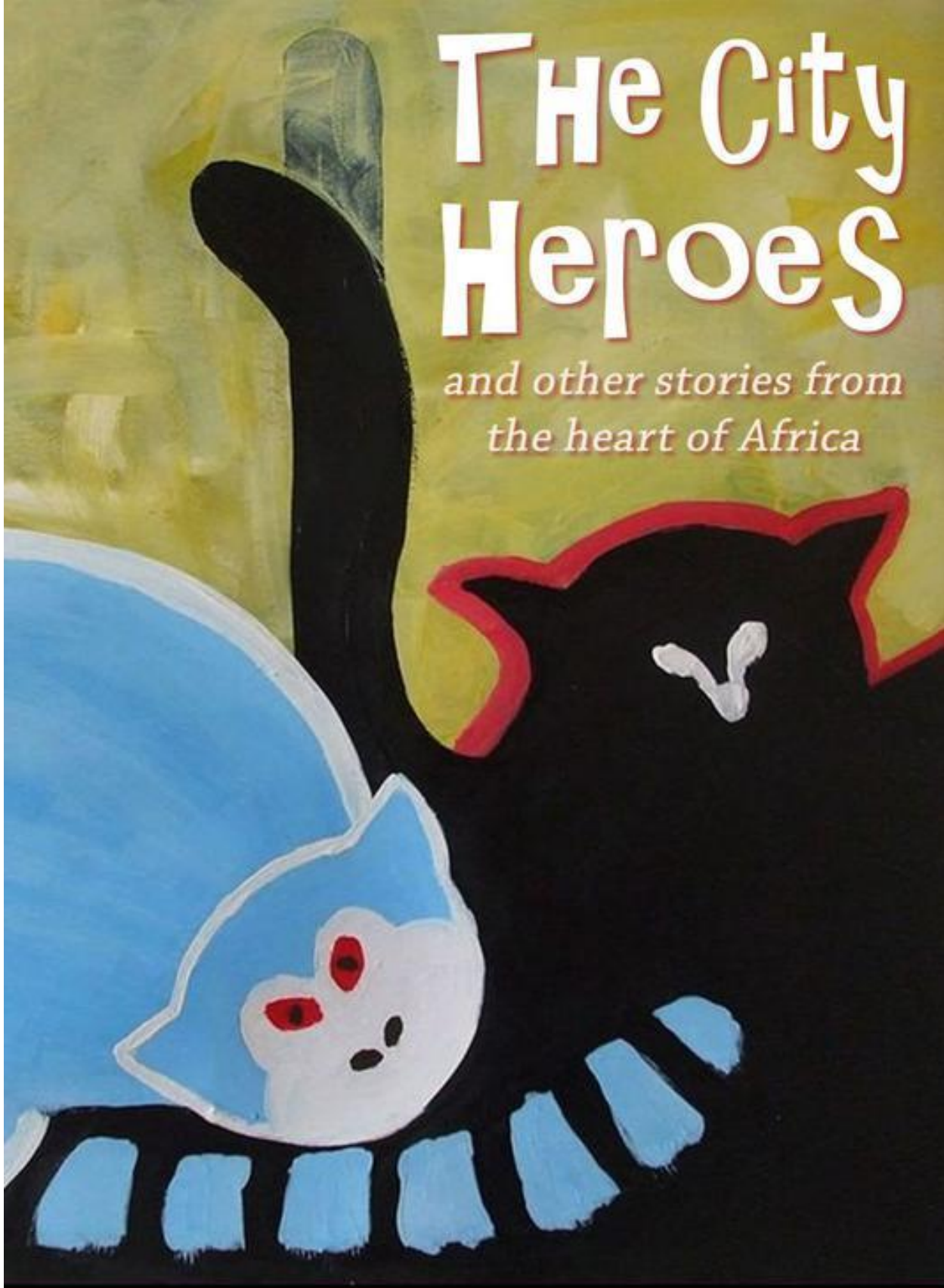




The City Heroes

*and other stories from
the heart of Africa*

Omoruyi Uwuigiaren

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Open Books

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CHAPTER ONE

The Outside World

The night was as dead as a doornail and Lady Tranquility took her seat in the neighborhood. Dag, a frustrated cat in the pool of old age, had nothing better to do than lie on the rooftop of a bungalow that was begging for renovation. The cat gazed at the beautiful earth that spread before him as if it were a balance sheet under the nose of a shrewd accountant.

Dag was not alone. Other cats that had also known misfortune lay around the old cat like a pasture clothed with flocks. Dag cleared his throat and said, “I have no passion for living any more. How can we exist without offending?”

“That is for the next world!” said Fred as he scratched his hindquarter.

Raising his head and yawning, Pork said, “It is impossible to walk through life without enemies. It may be better to live in isolation. But I have yet to see an isolated man who is happy.”

Dag sighed as if the hands of impossibility had challenged him. “Did I tell you my master has not fed me for two nights?” he asked his friends.

“No, but I have heard that bedtime story before,” said Pork as he sighed then turned away.

“I will never forget what that old man did to me,” said Dag as he shook his head.

“I have never seen you in this mood,” said Pork. “Tell us, what did he do to you?”

“Three nights ago I chased a rat into his kitchen. The little devil disappeared into a hole in the wall, which was near my master’s soup pot. I wanted to leave the kitchen, but I knew that as soon as I’d gone, the rat would come out of the hole and devour the soup. So I stayed back to keep vigil over the old man’s meal and possibly snuff the life out of the foolish rat if he ventured out of hiding. As I lay silently in the corner, hoping I would take care of the unfortunate soul if the opportunity presented itself, I heard a squeak and was not disappointed when I raised my head and saw the rat. It was heading towards the soup pot on the table. Seeing that the rat was too close to the pot, I pounced.” Dag paused and fought gallantly to hold back his tears. “But I missed the little devil and fell on the pot, and the soup poured out. The rat, happy with my fate, squeaked and disappeared through a little opening on the window frame.” Dag heaved at the indignity of his memory.

“It was silly of the rat to mock you,” Pork reacted.

Dag continued. “The disturbance almost presented me with a meal, it’s true. But before I had even a taste of the soup my master, an old dwarf of a man, rushed

into the kitchen and pointed his torch in the direction of the chaos. He found me at the center of the mess and was disappointed. His face went red with rage because he thought I was trying to feast on his soup. This might have been true if I'd had the opportunity, but before I could blink, he grabbed the broomstick by the doorpost and gave me the beating of my life. When I finally broke free of his angry grip, I fled from the kitchen. That night I slept on a mango tree by the old fence in his compound."

Pork's countenance fell. "Anybody in your master's shoes would have done the same. Don't get me wrong; I do not mean that you were at fault. You had good intentions, but your master did not understand. Well, such is life! And don't blame yourself, because mistakes make our world go round. Like every cat, your duty is to get rid of the rats. But that was not your night, Dag, and apparently your master could not understand why such a deed was committed under his roof."

"I doubt if he will ever trust me again," Dag said sadly. "I have not been myself since he chased me out of the house."

"Don't be drowned by your misfortune. And don't expect too much from people. Let it go, Dag. The only thing that is constant in life is change. Besides, you are not the only one with a sad story. Fred told me that his master's new wife doesn't like him," Pork said. He looked at Fred, who frowned as if he had not tasted a befitting meal for a while.

“That’s too bad,” said Dag.

Fred spoke in his kindest voice: “Every cat knows how important it is to be loved by the master and his family.”

Dag coughed a bit and said, “So true! At my age, I have no business with people who do not love me. But as long as I get my meals, I’m okay.”

“I understand you, Dag. But what happened to me was a miserable experience. My master’s wife is a witch!” Fred disclosed.

Pork was alarmed. “Ah, that’s a horrible suspicion.”

“I know what I am saying. I cannot count the number of times that she threw me from the balcony,” Fred replied.

“What?” Dag mused. “You mean she threw you from the second story of the building?”

Fred nodded. “Yes! The last time she did it; I fell on top of a car and fractured my leg.”

“So that’s why we didn’t see you for a few weeks,” Dag said with a frown.

“I had to stay away to avoid embarrassing questions,” Fred replied.

“Was your master aware of her treachery?” Pork asked.

“No!” Fred replied.

“That’s where you went wrong. If I were you, I would have disgraced his wife before him,” Pork boasted.

“How?” Fred drew his haunches into a tight ball as the stars began to disappear from the bare chest of the sky.

“Good question... I would make sure he saw me as soon as he returned home,” Pork replied.

“I tried it several times. But the woman always locked me out. My master never once set his large, innocent eyes on me,” Fred said.

Dag cleared his throat as if an idea had flown into his head. “I wonder when all this will end. If we are not beaten, then we are killed without guilt or mercy, like an antelope that strays into the den of a deadly predator.”

“I do not foresee any end to our tragedies because the people do not care about us. They seem to be swimming in a strange pool. They are selfish and self-centered. To be optimistic, our victory might be in the next world,” Fred declared.

Pork disagreed with them: “We are not all suffering. Blaize has a good master and he is doing well.” He looked about. “I wonder why the little soul is not here. Maybe he is under the spell of sleep. Of course that is what to expect when the going is good.”

“Why would a rich cat venture into such a humble neighborhood to find his meal? Blaize told me he has the luxury of feasting on the same fare as his master, whose heart flows with the milk of human kindness,” Fred said.

Suddenly, a strange movement from behind alarmed them. “Who is that?” Dag inquired. He cast a weak glance at the darkness that wrapped itself around the silent night.

“Who do you think?” said a tiny voice, laughing.

Blaize advanced grinning from ear to ear, his tail held high and the tip curled forward. “Good evening, guys?” he greeted.

“Blaize, it’s you!” Dag smiled and thrust his face forward, as if trying to spy a thief on a cold night. “I didn’t know that you would be here tonight. And what is it that you’ve brought with you?”

“A roasted fish—for you guys,” Blaize replied and dropped the meal before them. A ray of hope flushed over their faces. Pork smiled like a man under the spell of liquor. “Fish from you, Blaize?” He moved a few steps closer and smelled the fish. “It smells like the gate of heaven!” he said. Then he looked at Dag and Fred and said, “What are we waiting for?”

And all three cats feasted as if there were no tomorrow.

“The stars have disappeared,” Blaize observed. “Let’s make it snappy; I am afraid it may rain tonight.”

“Rain is good,” said Pork. “It washes the dust away.” Then he returned to the meal.

Blaize was apologetic: “The fish seems not enough for you guys. Perhaps you will need to find something else to eat in the neighborhood.”

“The neighborhood is for all of us,” Dag said, chewing noisily. The joy of all three cats almost reached the high heaven as they licked their mouths and the meal settled well in their bellies.

“Thanks, Blaize,” said Pork. “What a lovely way to begin the evening.”

“What are friends for?” said the fortunate Blaize. “I would give more if I had my way.”

“Now, let’s see what we can get in the neighborhood,” Dag suggested.

Enthusiastic Fred agreed. “Not a bad idea!”

Blaize led the way down the bungalow’s rainspout, and one after the other, they disappeared into the warm hands of the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Flinz

Dag and the other cats made their way down the silent street in an effort to find the second course of their dinner. Unconcerned, they strolled down Maxwell Street, the home of Flinz, a notorious cat who was feared by the entire feline population of the city. It was rumored that Flinz's breath could kill a dove!

Maxwell Street lay in the belly of discomfort, and its ugliness was there for all eyes to see. The streetlights were dim; they had seen better days. The buildings, too, were swimming in the pool of old age and begging for renovation. Parts of the old street were overrun with rats and mice—meals that poor Dag and friends would normally have found promising but tonight lay beyond their reach and strength.

The cats were tired from their long walk, so they rested a short distance from a shopping mall, which housed the finest buildings on the old street. But just as they settled down, Flinz emerged from behind a cracked old fence and stole past Dag and the others. He dashed into the mall, almost unnoticed, to commit what had earned him the nickname 'the notorious cat'. After a few minutes inside the mall, Flinz found some groceries on a shelf and lost his balance trying to reach the food. Blaize was the first to be alerted. "What's that?" he asked with a grimace.

Dag raised his head and glanced about. “I don’t know.” His voice revealed his caution.

Fred cleared his throat and said, “It could be a thief!” He exchange glances with the others.

“You may be right,” said Blaize. “Let’s go see who the criminal is,” he suggested, and faced the mall with a good speed. The other cats followed, flinging glances in every direction to make sure that no one was on their trail. As soon as they got to the mall, Blaize signaled his friends to stop. Before they could blink, Blaize climbed up to one of the half-open windows and peered inside. There was Flinz, feasting on the groceries! A ray of anger flushed over Blaize’s face. Returning to his friends, he reported, “We have an enemy in there!”

“Who?” Dag probed, simpering.

“It’s Flinz!” Blaize replied.

“Who is Flinz?” asked Pork.

“Flinz lives on the street that leads to the train station. It is said that he once ate an animal that had been sacrificed by humans, and is now immersed in a pool of misfortune. After losing his fine attributes, he withdrew from public life and became a terror to the people.”

“What a pity. Life is no bed of roses!” Dag said, and turned to go.

“No! We must fight him!” Blaize proclaimed. “The wicked soul killed my brother after they had a heated argument over a piece of meat in the market square. And I have vowed to avenge my brother’s death. There is no better time to do so than this beautiful night. Then my brother’s death will have had a purpose!”

Dag now recalled the sad story. “Yes, I remember. Wasn’t it the cat you told me about that lived in the train station?”

“Yes!” Blaize responded. “And that was four days ago.”

Then Pork offered a jewel of advice: “You’d best forget about Flinz and mind your business. I don’t think vengeance is the way to handle this issue.”

Blaize reacted, “Check my face and read my lips, and you will see that nothing can stop me tonight, Pork. My brother cannot have died for nothing!”

“Pork is right,” Dag interjected. “We came here to find a befitting meal for the night, not to battle. Don’t allow this issue into your head, my friend.” The elderly cat pulled Blaize to his side.

Blaize shoved him off. “You don’t know how it hurts to lose a brother. My brother was my best friend and was everything to me.” Tears gathered in his eyes as Blaize moved away. Before Dag and the other cats could make a move, Blaize had disappeared through the window and was received by the treachery inside the mall.

There was a momentary silence as Blaize advanced to the corner where Flinz was having a one-cat party. Red with rage, Blaize shouted, “You are a wicked soul, and your madness ends today!”

Raising his head, Flinz cleared his throat as a queer look paraded over his face, “Why call me such a name on a cold night, my poor friend?”

“I see that you have forgotten that you killed my brother!”

Flinz pushed his meal to one side, and tried to recall who the fellow was, but he could not remember. So he fixed his gaze on Blaize: “I have no memory for an ugly past. Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me. Who exactly is your brother?”

“Don’t tell me that you have forgotten the fellow you slew at the market square some months ago!”

“Oh, yes... Now I remember. But it is one of those things. Brother killing brother and so forth,” Flinz replied unrepentantly and went back to his meal.

“I have vowed to avenge my brother’s death.”

After swallowing a lump, Flinz replied, “You don’t have to announce it. Let your actions speak for you. But I will advise you to refrain from vengeance, because it is not in our power to take life.”

“But you killed my brother!”

“Yes. But I never wanted to. He refused to let me have my way. And that was why I sent him to the silent world. Now, please go away. Sometimes I lose my temper and find myself going against my nature in circumstance such as this one.”

“No! I refuse to leave!” The arched back and bristling fur demonstrated Blaize’s aggression; his tail was confidently upright and his rear stood firm, while the front of his body retreated and his fur stood straight up to make him look bigger than he actually was. He was certainly ready to give Flinz a good fight.

Flinz chuckled. “So you want to fight me? Do not add your death to this tragedy, my friend. Leave here!” Flinz ordered. He crouched low, not ready to submit, with chin tucked in, ears turned to show their backs and whiskers forwarded and ready to face the threat.

Blaize started the fight with a fierce blow that caught Flinz on the neck. But just as he pressed his advantage, and no eye was watching, he made a slash across the cat’s right cheek and some whiskers were lost. Blaize let out with an agonized cry as they shared blows from one end of the store to the other. However, it was only a matter of time before the advantage shifted to Flinz, and Blaize tasted frustration that night. Flinz had left Blaize devastated, then dashed out of the mall and raced towards the train station for all he was worth. Before Blaize could even blink, his enemy was gone.

Not long after, Dag, Pork and Fred rushed to the scene where Blaize had received the beating of his life. Dag was the first to speak. “Where is Flinz?”

Blaize pointed towards the train station and managed to croak, “There!” There was no strength left in him.

Pork and Fred tried to give chase, but before they could get out of the mall, Flinz had disappeared into thin air. With darkness hanging around the corner, and disappointment taking its toll, they shook their heads in disbelief and returned to the store. As a matter of fact, Blaize had yet to shrug off the injury he’d suffered at the hands of Flinz. “You were not prepared for the fight, Blaize.” Pork said.

That much was true. Later, they could discuss how to cut the bully down to size, but for now Dag helped the injured Blaize to his feet. “We must leave now,” said Dag. But just as they made for the window that was halfway open, they were alarmed by a strange sound from the street. “What’s that?” Pork took cover behind one of the shelves.

“Sssh! Keep your voice low,” Dag warned as, one after another, they scaled the window only to witness a bizarre occurrence that was taking place under the gloomy eyes of the silent night. On the street was a man being mobbed by a crowd of people. One after another they rained down their clubs upon the man until at last he lay gasping and choking. His head rolled to one side as life itself faded from his

lips. After the assault was over, and after all the belongings of the dead man had been placed in the pockets of his assailants, the mob disappeared into the night.

“What have they done?” Pork inquired incredulously.

“Can’t you see that they just beat a man dead?” Blaize replied.

Dag shook his head in dismay. “What a wicked world! Humans do not value life as we do. No cat I know could be that brutal!”

But Blaize had something different to say: “What about Flinz? Is there any difference between that scoundrel and the mob?”

“Flinz is a bad example, and his days are numbered,” Dag replied with a frown.

“I hope so,” Blaize mumbled.

Fred sighed. “I’m not so sure that the man is dead...”

“Nor am I,” Pork said. “We are too far away to assume that he has gone to meet his ancestors.”

“Let’s go and see if he is still alive,” Dag said, and led the cats to the street where the man lay in a pool of his own blood. Once they reached the scene, they were sad to see that the man had indeed walked into silence. Dag said, “This is not good. I know this man. He lives at the end of this street. I wonder why he’s come home so late today.”

“That is not the issue, Dag. No one has the right to take his life. Like every citizen of this land, each man has the right to freedom of movement,” Fred stated.

“Whatever kept him out late must have been important,” Blaize said.

“Only God knows. If humans would take security seriously, this man would have returned unharmed to his house,” Pork said. He sighed a long sigh.

A momentary silence hung in the air as the cats stared at the poor soul. Not long after, thunder crashed in the sky and it began to rain. “I’ve heard enough for today,” Dag announced and walked away. The elderly cat climbed the roof of one of the buildings and disappeared. The other cats knew that venturing further into the treacherous night was not the best idea, so they followed the path of their old friend.

CHAPTER THREE

New Owner

The morning walked briskly into brightness, and as human activities grew, a bald man whose lips were hidden under a heavy line of moustache walked into William Otama Street. He was frail, and his legs descended on the face of the earth as if he could never hurt a fly. Dr. Pepper, as most people called him was dressed in native attire that had seen better days. With him was his son Baldwin. The boy was dressed in old pajamas and boots as they approached the home of Priest Valdin, who sat on his balcony reading a newspaper. And Priscilla, a fat, jolly woman with hand to chin sat next to the priest. They had been married for years. “Valdin, Valdin,” Dr. Pepper managed to croak from the gate.

The old man pulled his spectacles down and looked over them. Then he put them back up and looked out under them. He seldom looked through them. “How are you, Doctor?” Priest Valdin said as if he were next to God.

“My noble friend, life is good!” Dr. Pepper replied.

Valdin looked straight into the eyes of his visitor. There was something odd about him but he could not put his finger on it. “Doctor, what is wrong?” he asked as he offered them seats.

The bewildered guest sat and straightened his chin, “I have a truckload of misfortune hanging from my neck like an Olympic medal,” Dr. Pepper said.

The priest dropped his newspaper on the table and signaled his wife to leave. Clearing his throat, he said, “Whatever misfortune weighs upon your poor soul is not the end of life. I have seen men bend the ugliest circumstances to their favor. You can, too. What is your problem?”

“In such a perilous time as this, can you believe that I share my house with rats? And I have spent so much on the treatment of fever in the last few months... I will soon be swimming in the pool of poverty if all my money must go to such things,” the Doctor explained gravely.

The priest returned, “That is no problem. Do you have a cat?”

“No!” the guest replied. “But I need one.”

“I have two cats in my house. But let me speak with my wife before I make any commitment,” the priest said as he again adjusted his spectacles. He rose to his feet and went into the house. Not long after, he returned to the visitors with a cat in a cage. “My wife and I agreed to let you have Blaize!”

Dr. Pepper was very excited. “Thank you, Valdin. I’m sure he will give those rats a run for their money. Not only that, but my son now has a pet! What did you say is the name of the cat?”

“Blaize!” The priest replied.

“What a good name!” Dr. Pepper said. He could not hide his pleasure.

Valdin lowered his spectacles. “You will enjoy the cat. But do me a favor, Doctor. Take good care of Blaize.”

“Ah, I will spoil him with rich meals. He will surely have the best treatment I can provide. Also, with the rats in my house, Blaize will never go hungry.” They all laughed out loud as Dr. Pepper sneezed and announced, “We must leave now.”

With a broad grin sitting comfortably on his face, Valdin took a deep breath. “Okay. Thanks for coming. And you will never have a dull moment as long as Blaize remains under your roof!”

Dr. Pepper replied with a smile and moved away...

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Thank you!

